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ABSTRACT

This occasional paper views homework as an opportunity to exploit the potential of outside resources and environments to complement in-school learning opportunities. Out-of-school learning opportunities are considered in the context of principles for planning and implementing learning activities. These principles involve: (1) goal relevance, meaning that the activity is built around powerful ideas that are basic to accomplishment of important curricular goals; (2) appropriate level of difficulty, meaning that the activity is difficult enough to provide some challenge and extend learning, but not so difficult as to leave many students confused or frustrated; (3) feasibility, meaning the activity is feasible for accomplishment within prevailing constraints; and (4) cost effectiveness, meaning benefits justify the activity's cost in time and trouble. The authors identify 11 potential purposes or functions of out-of-school learning opportunities, drawing examples from social studies. Among other advantages, assignments can provide opportunities for students to apply what they are learning in school to their lives outside of school; to draw on their life experiences and family backgrounds to provide case material as input to in-class discussions; and to involve parents and other family members in the school's agenda in rewarding ways. (SH)

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Occasional Paper 135

RECONCEPTUALIZING HOMEWORK AS OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy

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Abstract

The authors argue the value of viewing homework not just as an extension of the school day that provides more of the same kinds of things that are done in class but as an opportunity to exploit the potential residing in outside resources and environments to complement in-school learning opportunities. They then identify 11 potential purposes or functions of out-of-school learning opportunities, drawing examples from social studies. Among other potential advantages, these out-of-school assignments can provide opportunities for students to apply what they are learning in school to their lives outside of school, to draw upon their diverse life experiences and family backgrounds to provide valuable case material as input to in-class discussions, and to involve parents and other family members in the school's agenda in nonthreatening and rewarding ways.

RECONCEPTUALIZING HOMEWORK AS OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy[1]

What does the word homework bring to mind? Work that was not completed during school? Assignments given to punish nonproductive or misbehaving students? Work that the teacher did not get to during class today? Skills practice exercises that are mostly "no brainers?" All of the above?

Even when not viewed negatively, homework tends to be viewed as humdrum--an extension of in-class seatwork time. We think that this is unfortunate, because out-of-school assignments can not only extend but complement and enrich the learning that occurs in school. Consequently, we suggest reconceptualizing and expanding our views of what homework can and should be. We will elaborate on this notion after reviewing how homework has been viewed over time, the types of homework that have been identified, and the purposes and positive and negative effects that have been attributed to them.

Cooper (1989) recently published a comprehensive review of these topics. He notes that early in the 20th century, homework was viewed as an important means of disciplining children's minds. Learning theories favored at that time likened the mind to a muscle, and homework was seen as providing good mental exercise. By the 1940s, emphasis on learning through drill was being replaced by emphasis on learning through problem solving, so that homework emphasizing rote memorization was called into question. Some authors even viewed homework as punishment or expressed concern that it was an intrusion into time that students could be using to learn more important things in life.

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Sputnik reversed this trend toward less homework. Suddenly, homework became a critical means of accelerating students' knowledge growth. By the mid-1960s, however, there was a resurgence of concern that homework might thwart children emotionally or preclude them from experiencing life's opportunities. Most recently, a return to traditional values, concern about American students' test scores, and reports such as A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) have led to a resurgence of emphasis on homework. Many policy advocates are portraying homework as an essential component of good education, and some school districts are requiring it.

The research literature does not support such simple and sweeping views. An exhaustive meta-analysis by Cooper (1989) revealed positive but very low and nonsignificant relationships between the assignment of homework or time spent on homework and student achievement in the elementary grades and significant but only modest relationships at the secondary grades. Cooper concluded, and we agree, that we need to move beyond simple conceptualizations based on whether or how much homework is assigned and begin looking at various forms of homework and their ostensible purposes.

According to Palardy (1988), teachers identify four purposes for assigning homework. The first is that it teaches students self-discipline, independence, and responsibility. Reviews by Strother (1984) and Featherstone (1985) support this claim. A second claimed purpose is that homework increases achievement. This is a common rationale for assigning homework, despite a lack of support for it at the elementary grades and only modest support at the secondary grades (Cooper, 1989; England & Flatley, 1985). The third purpose is that homework fulfills the expectations of students, parents, and the public. Pendergrass (1985) has called this the most powerful reason for assigning

homework. Finally, a fourth stated purpose is that homework expands and eases the time constraints on the curriculum.

Teachers assign several types of homework. Most scholars (Lee & Pruitt, 1979; Palardy, 1988) identify at least three types and some add a fourth. The most common type is intended to provide students with practice through opportunities to apply recent learning or to reinforce newly acquired skills. A second common type is preparation. Here, students are asked to read or work on assignments that will prepare them for subsequent in-class activities such as lectures, discussions, or simulations. The third common type of homework assignment is extension. Extension assignments usually are described as opportunities to accommodate students' individualized interests and pursuits for information, although they are often difficult to distinguish from ordinary practice assignments. A fourth type of homework assignment, often called creative, is intended to require students to integrate many skills and concepts in an effort to construct new knowledge.

Various positive and negative effects of homework have been claimed. Proponents claim that it increases academic achievement, improves student attitudes toward school, improves students' study habits and skills, encourages students to learn during leisure time, and involves the parents productively. Opponents claim that homework may "burn out" students from academics or have other negative effects on attitudes, foster undesirable behaviors such as cheating, deny students leisure time, confuse parents and produce in them negative attitudes about school, increase the disparities between high and low achievers, or confuse the role of the teacher (by raising questions about whether and how homework assignments should be collected, corrected, graded, or returned).

Whether or not homework has the negative long-term effects that its critics claim, it is clear that it often engenders negative perceptions. If it is leftover seatwork that was not finished at school, it may be an unwelcome reminder of one's limited abilities or inefficient work habits. If it is a practice or extension exercise assigned explicitly as homework, it may be viewed as extra work that the teacher is demanding for no particularly good reason. Students who have difficulty understanding or completing the assignment may complain later of a lack of clear goals, incomplete or confusing directions, lack of supportive instruction, or insufficient feedback. These concerns underscore the need to consider the nature and quality of homework assignments, not just their frequency.

Out-of-School Learning Opportunities

We believe that much is to be gained from reconceptualizing homework assignments as out-of-school learning opportunities. For one thing, this will reduce the tendency to view homework negatively as leftover seatwork or unwelcome additional practice. In addition, it will help both teachers and students to view out-of-school learning opportunities not as just "more of the same" but as learning activities that complement what goes on in school by exploiting the potential residing in outside resources and environments. Many out-of-school learning opportunities involve activities that are unfeasible or even impossible to do in the classroom, yet are vital components of a well-rounded education.

We will consider out-of-school learning opportunities within the context of the principles for planning and implementing learning activities that we have outlined elsewhere (Brophy & Alleman, 1991). These principles include four primary criteria that all learning activities must meet: (1) goal

relevance (the activity is built around powerful ideas that are basic to accomplishment of important curricular goals), (2) appropriate level of difficulty (the activity is difficult enough to provide some challenge and extend learning but not so difficult as to leave many students confused or frustrated), (3) feasibility (the activity is feasible for accomplishment within the prevailing constraints), and (4) cost effectiveness (the educational benefits expected to be derived from the activity justify its costs in time and trouble).

The principles also include several secondary criteria that are useful for choosing among activities that meet all of the primary criteria. Thus, other things being equal, activities may be seen as more desirable if they allow students to accomplish several goals simultaneously; are viewed by students as enjoyable, or at least as meaningful and worthwhile; involve natural, holistic, or authentic applications of learning rather than isolated skills practice or artificial exercises; engage students in higher order thinking; or are adaptable to accommodate individual differences in interests or abilities. Finally, the principles specify that activities should be structured and scaffolded by teachers in ways that will help students to engage in them with metacognitive awareness of their goals and metacognitive control of their strategies. In summary, activities should be selected for inclusion in the curriculum because they are viewed as significant learning opportunities for students, and they should be presented to students in ways that help them to recognize their purposes and respond accordingly.

Although these principles were developed primarily with in-school activities in mind, they also apply to out-of-school activities, with some minor modifications. First, out-of-school activities can use the student's total environment to provide data or learning resources. This makes certain activities feasible that would not be feasible in the classroom. Also, cost effectiveness

does not need to be assigned as high a priority for out-of-school learning activities as for in-school ones. Limited class time needs to be concentrated on lessons and teacher structuring and scaffolding of activities, but once students are clear about what they need to do for assignments, they can work on them outside of class. They also can work on individually negotiated or time-consuming projects that complement the whole-group lessons and activities that occur during class time.

In suggesting guidelines for out-of-school activities, we assume that school subjects should be taught for understanding, appreciation, and application to life outside of school. This implies that teachers plan both their lessons and their activities with major curricular goals in mind. Rather than just thinking in terms of content coverage, they ask themselves what their students should be able to do as the result of each lesson or activity--what capabilities or dispositions will be developed. Planning and assessment then focus on these key goals, which include not just knowledge but skills, values, and dispositions to action in relevant application situations.

Coupling these principles and assumptions with our ideas about some of the potential advantages of using the student's total environment as a data source, we have identified 11 potential purposes or functions of out-of-school learning opportunities. They are not presented in any particular order because their relative value will depend on one's hierarchy of instructional goals. We believe that these types of out-of-school learning activities are applicable in teaching any of the school subjects, but our examples have been drawn from social studies because our current research efforts are focused on social education.

Provide for Life Application of School Learning

If out-of-school learning opportunities are thoughtfully planned with reference to major social education goals, they can serve both as checkpoints for goal accomplishment and as powerful vehicles for developing appreciation of the utility of school learning. In planning their instruction and assignments, teachers should ask themselves, "How does what is assigned out of school reflect what is learned in school?" and "How does what is learned in school apply to my students' lives, both now and in the future?"

Suppose the goals for a primary-grade unit on shelter were to help students learn and appreciate the reasons for different forms of shelter. Students would learn that people's shelter needs are determined in large part by local climate and geographic features, that most housing is constructed using materials fashioned from local natural resources, and that certain forms of housing reflect cultural practices or economic conditions. Given these goals, the teacher might ask students to investigate their local area thoroughly as they walk or ride to and from school. An in-school, group-generated data gathering and recording worksheet would be a useful tool for guiding the looking, gleaning the information, summarizing the results, and analyzing them later during in-school discourse structured to enhance meaningfulness.

In teaching a fifth-grade history unit on the American Revolution, the goals might be to develop student understanding and appreciation of the origins of American political values and policies. Consequently, the treatment of the Revolution and its aftermath would emphasize the historical events and philosophies that shaped the thinking of the writers of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Content coverage, questions, and activities would focus on the issues that developed between England and the colonies and the ideals, principles, and compromises that went into the construction of the

Constitution. Assignments calling for research, critical thinking, and decision making might focus on topics such as the various forms of oppression that different colonial groups had experienced or the debates over the Bill of Rights.

A powerful out-of-school learning opportunity would be to have students use their own data sources (which might include the local paper, television, radio, current magazine publications, and local informants) to determine if locally oppressed groups still exist and, if so, why the Constitution has failed them. An alternative approach, using the out-of-school opportunity as a checkpoint, would be to compare our Revolution with the one unfolding in the Soviet Union today. Students would be encouraged to use as many data sources as possible in an effort to expose them to the wealth of information that is available.

Take Advantage of the Students' Diverse Environments by Using Them as Learning Resources

Too often teachers view differences among students purely as problems. However, these differences also can be used as opportunities--for students to begin with what they know best and link that knowledge and experience to what otherwise might be foreign to them, as well as for the teacher and the students' peers to learn from valuable resources who come to class with different, but equally rich, sets of experiences. For example, in the unit on shelter mentioned earlier, one of the goals would be for the students to develop knowledge about and appreciation for the variety of building materials and structures that constitute peoples' homes. In any given classroom, there will be a range of shelter types and building materials represented, which might include mobile homes, modular homes, apartments, duplexes, single-family dwellings, townhouses, or condominiums constructed from materials such as

brick, wood, metal, or stone. What better way to build understanding and appreciation for shelter types and materials than to use students' actual "living" data as the foundation? Students can become valuable learning resources for their class as they, with teacher guidance, view their shelters with new eyes.

The emphasis of the in-class discourse would be on the trade-offs represented by the range of shelter types and building materials available in the environment and on the factors such as money availability, location of current employment, personal taste, and convenience that contribute to the selection made, rather than a mere tally of who lives in what kind of structure. We see no point in avoiding these topics, because students are already well aware of family differences in wealth and living conditions. If such topics are handled sensitively, with emphasis on developing understanding and appreciation rather than dwelling on differences, teachers should be able not only to foster new insights in their students but also to develop in them more positive feelings for one another and appreciation of the value of sharing information and experiences.

Provide Opportunities for All Learners to Serve as Human Resources in Bringing in Personal Data

If the unit topic were family, the goals might include the development of knowledge about various membership configurations, the variety of roles assumed by family members, appreciation for those differences, and an inquisitiveness about the similarities and differences among cultures both in the United States and throughout the world. Having students gather data about their own families to share with peers can create immediate interest in an often placid, repetitive subject. The initial data gathering would be structured to ensure new challenges and would be followed by a systematic analysis. For example, if two

students live within extended family arrangements, structured discourse can reveal the roles and expectations of various family members. These attributes of extended families can be compared to those of nuclear families in our culture and to those of extended families in other cultures, noting similarities as well as differences.

In a unit on physical regions of the United States, the goals might include acquisition of a knowledge base regarding the relationship of natural phenomena to industries and appreciation for the pros and cons of humans manipulating the physical environment. Here, the teacher could encourage students to share their experiences by bringing photographs or describing scenarios which illustrate how their families have experienced these phenomena either through their pleasure travels (vacationing at a mountain resort) or through their employment (living in a variety of places so a parent could continue to work in highway construction).

Providing Opportunities for Making Learning Collaborative

The local environment is rich with opportunities to exploit the power of working together. Students need to understand that their total out-of-school experience is a potential data source, so that they can include a parent, an older sibling, a babysitter, a neighbor, an adult friend, or the person who cuts their hair or coaches Little League as collaborators.

For example, a seventh-grade social studies unit might focus on communities around the world, with goals including acquiring knowledge about and appreciation for different economic systems (e.g., traditional, command, market). Students could be assigned to solicit local opinions and understandings about these economic types. Coupled with reading the textbook and other written sources, this research would prepare them for an in-class debate focusing on

the question, "Should the Soviet Union change to a market economy?" The collaborative learning that occurs outside the classroom should improve in-class participation among enlightened learners, as well as create a more informed cadre of human resources sprinkled throughout the community whose involvement will enhance their regard for the teacher. Equally important, students will have opportunities to become involved with their parents and other adults in positive and productive relationships, and these adults will have opportunities to enjoy nonthreatening and rewarding involvement in the students' education.

Exploit Learning Opportunities That Are Not Cost Efficient on School Time

A student's home and the surrounding community are filled with learning resources that, when tapped, can provide the student with a range of challenges that connect in-school goals to life opportunities. Often these community resources would not be cost efficient for use with the whole class but could be exploited by one or more individual students. Suppose, for example, that an intermediate-grade class were studying local government. Due to the complications involved in making travel arrangements and rescheduling classes, it may not be feasible for the whole class to attend a city council meeting. However, a few students could volunteer to have their parents take them to such a meeting where they could serve as observers, data gatherers, and primary resources for a follow up in-class discussion.

Suppose a primary-grade class were studying the importance of rules and laws. While taking the whole class on a walking tour of the community looking for signs of unwritten and written rules and laws might be too time-consuming, this task could be a very productive and challenging use of after-school time. Students could easily combine this assignment with their regular school bus trip or walk home. Of course, it would be important for the students to use a

data retrieval form so that the next day's discussion of their diverse observations would not be based solely on memory.

Other examples of outside learning opportunities that can be useful when structured appropriately and tied to in-school goals include watching a television program to acquire knowledge and appreciation about a place or a group of people (e.g., a special program on the Amish), observing and studying commercials over a span of time in an effort to detect patterns, visiting a local pharmacy as a data source for investigating and comparing the costs of generic brands versus popularly labeled ones advertised on television, or studying the marketing strategies used by local supermarkets.

Individualize by Allowing Students to Construct Meaning and Personalize Learning

While in-school opportunities are often planned for the whole class, out-of-school learning experiences can focus on the learner's individuality. For example, suppose first graders were studying families and discussing the idea that rules are for everyone. An appropriate out-of-school individual learning opportunity would be for each student to discuss with family members the rules that they follow (for safety, cleaning the house, going to bed, etc.). These could be listed and taken to the classroom to show the diversity that exists among families. Children who could handle more intellectual challenges could be encouraged to interview a neighborhood family and make comparisons between the rules of the two families.

Another example of applying the unique resources of the individual to the study of family would be for students to gather data about family members and then construct photo albums, displays, or posters depicting their families. Students capable of going beyond the baseline assignment could investigate family leisure activities, hobbies, work roles, favorite sayings, or unique

holiday customs. All of this could be shared in class during carefully scaffolded discourse.

Upper grade students could interview family members to determine how they view their roles, their heritage and how they celebrate it, or how they make family decisions. These out-of-school learning experiences can be rewarding for all of the individuals involved, and the data that are "harvested" during follow-up in-class discussions can be provocative, insightful, and rich with diverse examples.

Enhance Opportunities for Children to Develop Conceptual Patterns, Relationships, and Linkages

Due to time constraints, self imposed or real, social studies content often ends up being narrowly focused and absolute. For example, suppose one of the goals of a social studies unit is for the students to understand and appreciate the global connections between their community and the Far East. Typically, students would be asked to read assigned textbook material, discuss it in class, and list connections on the chalkboard. This lesson would have more impact if students were asked to first interview the adults in their household regarding their views of global connections with the Far East. For example, a parent who is presently laid off from an American automobile plant might feel quite differently than a parent who sells Japanese-made audio equipment at a local appliance store. Interviewing could be coupled with an investigation of the home to determine the number and nature of goods from the Far East that are found there. These data then would be funneled back into the classroom to aid students in achieving the "documented" realization that there is a range of beliefs and values about globalness in the community which is directly tied to peoples' life experiences.

Intellectually Engage the Learners in Work That Forces Transfer

Too often, information is compartmentalized and learning is solely measured by a quiz at the end of a lecture or an exam at the end of a unit, with little attention to the use of the information later. Out-of-school learning opportunities can set forth daily challenges for real testing to see if what is learned at school will transfer. For example, if the goals of a unit were to develop understanding of the reasons for conserving our natural resources and to identify ways to do so, students could easily pass a written exam to satisfy these goals at face value. To ensure that these goals have been met, however, one could challenge students to examine relevant phenomena at the local level, including the constraints on local practices (e.g., interviewing appropriate informants to determine why there is no mass transit commuter transportation to a nearby city, why there are designated commuter lots, why packets of recycled paper cost more than others, or why there are or are not restrictions on watering lawns). If the students' learning does not result in changed behavior (e.g., take an active role in conserving heat and electricity at home and in the classroom, actively campaign in an attempt to influence the local citizenry to consider resource issues), what has been achieved?

Foster Reflective Inquiry

We believe that opportunities for developing continuous reflective inquiry can be cultivated throughout the school years through out-of-school learning opportunities that build in reflection and wonder. For example, if a social education goal is for students to develop understanding about the physical regions of the United States and how they impact what people do, why not have students look at their immediate environment and begin to ask, for example, "How have local conditions affected peoples' work patterns?" or "Why is

this a sparsely populated area?" or "How have those who settled here adapted to or modified natural phenomena?"

Reflective inquiry should be encouraged with speculative questions that engender continuous observations and investigations. For example, in studying about physical regions, students could be encouraged to think about the pros and cons of preserving them in their current state. In studying the history of the community, they could be encouraged to examine present practices of respecting and caring for the elderly and to identify what might be done to preserve their memories, and more importantly, their human dignity.

Keep the Curriculum up to Date

Social education courses based on textbooks as their chief data source often are years behind the world. For example, not long ago we witnessed a sixth-grade class discussing life in the Soviet Union using a book copyrighted in 1980. Here it would be important to supplement or replace the text with out-of-school learning opportunities focused around newspapers, magazines, and television broadcasts. This supplemental information then could be used to inform discussion of the changes that are occurring and the new problems being created by a new set of conditions. Instead of reading outdated material, the students would learn at the cutting edge of world developments.

To add even more compelling interest, discussion could be focused on life for sixth graders in the Soviet Union today. For example, what might their social studies class be like today? How would it be different from five years ago? Would I, as a Russian sixth grader, be more or less optimistic about my future? How would the current conditions affect my family? Engagement in discussion of such questions could cause adults in the students' households to

see their children in a new light, and might even entice them into cross-generational dialogue about a topic of real interest.

Contextualize Learning

Social education has received its share of criticism because many students are not culturally literate. Despite at least two courses focusing on U.S. history and at least four opportunities to learn about the states and capitals, they often do not know when the U.S. proclaimed its independence, when Pearl Harbor was bombed, or where the largest state in the nation is located. The root of the problem may lie in the manner in which the material is covered--isolated "book learning."

One meaningful way to overcome this hurdle may be to provide parents with simple time lines and maps to be used at home. With these resources, many learning opportunities outside the classroom could be channeled back to meaningful family discussions of social studies topics, including locating them in time and space. Time lines, for example, could be used to anchor discussions of how old various family members or ancestors were (and where they were, what they were doing, etc.) when significant historical events occurred. Similarly, activities such as planning vacations or plotting national news events could be focused around appropriate maps. In this way, time and space information that is often just memorized and forgotten "book learning" can be learned and remembered with appreciation of its significance.

Conclusion

Because of the constraints within which they must work (age-graded classes of 20-40 students, time schedules, limited supply budgets, etc.), teachers must confine their instructional planning to activities that are feasible within the classroom setting. This means that students' learning

opportunities are necessarily limited and somewhat artificial compared to what they would be under more natural and unconstrained conditions. Given these realities, it seems important for teachers to take the opportunity to plan out-of-school learning opportunities that will expand and enrich the curriculum, rather than confining their purview to homework which is just "more of the same." Also, to the extent that teachers learn to view diversity of student background not just as a problem but also as a potential resource, they can begin to make assignments that will cause students to think and collect information about how concepts or principles learned at school apply to their home or family situations, then feed their findings back into subsequent class discussions, thereby making the learning more meaningful and personally relevant than it would have been otherwise.

We have reviewed 11 different ways in which out-of-school learning opportunities can enhance the curriculum, although most of these can be seen as elaborations on a few key ideas. One is that out-of-school assignments can provide opportunities for students to think critically about how some of the ideas learned in school apply to their lives out of school, and in the process, make personal decisions about some of the issues that they raise. In theory, much of what is in the school curriculum is there because it is thought to be important as preparation for students to cope with the demands of modern living and function as responsible citizens in our society. Unless students are encouraged and given opportunities to apply what they are learning to their lives outside of school, however, they may not see or appreciate the connections and thus may not get the intended "citizen preparation" benefits from their school learning.

A second key idea is that diversity in students' family, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and life experiences can provide valuable case

material as examples or applications of concepts or principles learned at school. The different personal or family experiences that students report will sometimes introduce issues that must be handled with great sensitivity by the teacher, but they also will enhance students' appreciation of the relevance and significance of the things they are learning.

A third key idea is that out-of-school assignments provide opportunities to involve parents and other family members in the school's agenda in non-threatening and rewarding ways. Parents may feel irritated or threatened if asked to help with homework that they do not understand themselves, but they are likely to be pleased to be asked to serve as resources by answering their children's questions about what life was like when they were younger, how they reacted to a major news event in the past, the details of what they do at work, or the trade-offs involved in their jobs as lifetime occupations. Both parents and students are likely to value the conversations that develop from such assignments, and these conversations are likely to reinforce familial bonds and increase the students' appreciation of and respect for their parents as individuals.

Out-of-school learning opportunities will most likely have such positive effects if they are planned and implemented with clear goals in mind and followed up with sharing and discussion in subsequent class sessions. Teachers will need to include instructions that clarify the goals of the assignment for students, and perhaps also some data collection sheets or other scaffolds that will help students to carry out the activity as intended. Where assignments are sensitive or demanding, it also might be advisable to send home explanations for the parents and alert them to this aspect of the curriculum when meeting with them. Like other activities, out-of-school learning opportunities will have their greatest impact if they are structured and scaffolded in ways

that will help students to carry them out with metacognitive awareness of their goals and purposes and metacognitive control of their strategies and if they are followed up later with debriefing discussions designed to focus on important conclusions and implications.

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